



Phenomenology

Andy Blunden's second lecture contains this useful passage:

"Most writers interpret Hegel by importing into their reading of Hegel Kant's concept of subject. This is wrong. Now it is true that on occasion, especially when he is commenting on Kant, Hegel does use the word 'subject' in the Kantian sense, that is to say, as meaning an individual, an individual adult citizen, to be a little more precise. This is invariably the sense in which the Kantian subject is used today, and the same sense is usually, rather kaleidoscopically, read into Hegel. Normally, Hegel simply uses the word 'person' to convey this meaning. For Hegel, 'subject' is not a philosophical synonym for 'person'. It is really important to remember this.

"The word subject went through some transformations since the Romans translated Aristotle, particularly with Descartes, but the core idea that Kant has imparted with the word is the coincidence of three things: the cogito of

Descartes, the bearer of ideas and knowledge, the idea of self-determining agent who bears moral responsibility for their actions, and identity or self-consciousness. All three of these entities coincide in the Kantian subject, and Hegel is true to this concept, but it is not an individual person.

“The individual is just a single atom of the whole entity constituted by the collective activity of the community as a whole. Of course, nothing other than an individual human being can think or bear moral responsibility for actions, but they cannot do so as isolated atoms; the content of our thinking is thought-objects which are constituted by the activity of the entire community and past generations. And our actions are vain and meaningless except insofar as they take on significance through the relation of the individual to the whole community. The point is, how to elaborate this idea of thought and moral responsibility as collective activities, and at the same time develop the conception of individuality which constitutes the essence of modern society.

“In the “System of Ethical Life,” Hegel approached the question of labour not so much from the standpoint of how individuals acquire knowledge, as how the universal, that is, a culture, is constructed. At the basic level, people work with plants, and then animals, and then machinery, and in doing so produce crops, herds and means of production which are passed on to future

generations. Likewise, in using words the language is maintained and developed and passed on to future generations, and finally, in abstracting the knowledge of culture and imparting it to a new generation in the raising of children, people are constructing and maintaining their 'second nature', the universals which are the content of all thought. When an individual thinks, they think with universals actively maintained by and meaningful only within their community.

"So to provide an adequate concept of the subject, Hegel has to let go of the idea of an individual locus of experience, with access to universal principles of Reason existing in some fictional hyperspace on one side, and on the other side, unknowable things-in-themselves. The content of experience is thought objects which have been constructed by collective activity..."

What we are therefore gaining here, from Hegel, is a philosophy that can reckon with the collective subject, or what Marx and Engels referred to in the last paragraphs of the second part of the [Communist Manifesto](#) as a "vast association of the whole nation". This is a democracy not as formality or mechanism, but as collective consciousness manifest as fact.

There is no possibility of communism without a conception of this kind.

In the same part of the Manifesto, Marx and Engels wrote

that in the “*vast association*”, the “*free development of each [would be] the condition for the free development of all*”. The individual subject is not excluded. On the contrary, the individual subject is the basic building-block of society. There is no society without individuals. But what we have, as well, is the collective, social subject.

What we get with Hegel, it seems – and we must confirm this with more reading of the original texts – is the first philosophical treatment of the collective that is not merely presumptuous and declaratory of its existence. We get a working model of the collective subject, and we get a description of how the collective consciousness is formed, and how it is maintained.

Let us finish off this instalment with a direct quotation from one of Hegel’s predecessors – the great [Spinoza](#) – and in the last instalment of this third part of the course, look again at some of Kant’s original writing. Then we will follow Andy Blunden’s route through Hegel for three more parts, until we come back to look at some of Hegel’s successors, such as Marx, Lenin, and [Ilyenkov](#).

Here is Spinoza:

“As far as the 'method for finding out the truth' is concerned, 'the matter stands on the same footing as the making of material tools.... For, in order to work iron, a hammer is needed, and the hammer cannot be forthcoming unless it has been made; but, in order to

make it, there was need of another hammer and other tools, and so on to infinity. We might thus vainly endeavour to prove that men have no power of working iron.

“But as men at first made use of the instruments supplied by nature to accomplish very easy pieces of workmanship, laboriously and imperfectly, and then, when these were finished, wrought other things more difficult with less labour and greater perfection. . . . So, in like manner, the intellect, by its native strength, makes for itself intellectual instruments, whereby it acquires strength for performing other intellectual operations, and from these operations gets again fresh instruments, or the power of pushing its investigations further, and thus gradually proceeds till it reaches the summit of wisdom.”

B. de Spinoza (1632-1677)

Improvement of the Understanding, Ethics and Correspondence

Picture: An anarchist ant (impossible).

- The above is to introduce the original reading-text: [Blunden, Hegel, Phenomenology and Kant, 2007](#).
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